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MYTHS, STEREOTYPES AND REALITIES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

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In 1851, exactly 140 years ago at a woman's rights conference during the Women's Suffrage movement, a freed African-American slave woman named Sojourner Truth, at a woman's rights conference asked the disturbing question, "Ain't I a woman?" She was the lone African-American woman, the only voice for women like herself at the meeting. She was not one of the invited speakers; she came forth on her own volition. Her assertion called for the recognition of dignity, respect and equal justice for all women. But Sojourner's assertion also revealed the contradictory, unequal status and treatment among White women, African-American women, and African-American men.

Sojourner has always been one of my heroines, a guardian angel whose spirit attests to the inner strength black women have historically possessed. As slaves African-American women were expected to work along side of African-American men, performing an equal share of work (Davis, 1981). Because they were women, they also were forced to serve as concubines, whores, wet nurses, and breeders. Rape and other forms of violence were part of their day-to-day existence. For African-American women slaves, there was neither rest nor relief from brutality.

Here it is some 140 years after Sojourner Truth and another lone African-American woman is declaring her right to be treated with dignity and respect. Her name is Anita Hill and she confronted Clarence Thomas, a nominee to the Supreme Court with allegations of sexual harassment. Only

after Hill's accusations were leaked to the media resulting in a public outcry from women around the country, did it force the Senate to delay the confirmation vote on Thomas. Instead, the Judiciary Committee held new hearings.

Throughout the three days of testimony, I keep thinking of the words Sojourner Truth so eloquently spoke, "Ain't I a woman?" I watched the members of the Senate Justiciary Committee demeaningly contort Anita Hill's motives for testifying and witnessed their insensitive interpretation of her experience of being sexually harassed. It finally hit home to me, that some 140 years after Sojourner Truth spoke her words, in the year 1991 - there was still an urgent need for an African-American woman to proclaim, "Ain't I a woman!"

Its been months since Anita Hill confronted Clarence Thomas with allegations of sexual harassment. Yet, I can't put this travesty to rest. I can't rid myself of the profound sorrow and outright rage this event has created within me. During that weekend in October, I sat mesmerized at the television through most of the Hearings. The papers I was supposed to be grading remained stacked and untouched on my desk. Errands that needed to be done weren't. At times, the testimony from Thomas and his associates were so licentiously contrived and overwhelmingly painful to watch that I had was a strong urge to escape.

I went for long walks, but there was no escape. On the

streets you could overhear bits and pieces of conversations about who was telling the truth Hill or Thomas. Browsing in stores, I could hear the Hearings on the radio. At one store I politely asked the salesman to change the station because listening to the dialogue between Thomas and Senator Hatch was making me physically ill. He immediately obliged without saying a word.

Throughout the Hearings my sleep was irregular. On Saturday night I had a very disturbing and powerful dream where white men dressed in black were removing all the furniture from my home. I tried to stop them, but they shoved me into corner of the living room. I awoke from this dream crying, with an eerie sense of helplessness; not since my Mother death had I felt so all alone. My African-American women friends experienced similar or even more profound reactions. One of my friends explained she hadn't slept since the Hearings began. Another talked about not eating for three days because she was unable to keep food down. Still another friend told of crying steadily during the telecast. Stories of physical and emotional reactions continued til way after the Senate approved Thomas's nomination.

After Thomas's Confirmation and the dust began to clear, I took some time to think about why this event evoked such a strong reaction within me. The simplest answer is that I identified with Anita Hill. Like me, she is a professional

African-American woman, well educated and has achieved much success in her career. I also am a college professor working in a discipline where there are few women and even fewer people of color. Hill comes from a lower working class background in rural Oklahoma. My roots are also located in the lower working class, but I grew up in the urban inner city of the South Bronx. We have both spent time at Yale University, she while a student at the Law School, and I as a member of the faculty at the School of Management. And, I too have experienced sexual harassment at work, while pursuing my education and on the streets of the neighborhoods where I lived.

But the severity of my reactions to the Thomas-Hill event is much more than just my identification with Hill. Anita Hill represented me when she testified. The pathological labels attributed to her, the mythologies about African-American professional women that were presented as truths, and the fact that her claim about being sexual harassed was not considered legitimate or even worthy of a hearing greatly affected me; I too felt victimized. The Hearing left me feeling naked and vulnerable. It was as if my business had been put in the street with no one there to explain my reality. I was appalled and outright horrified about the way Anita Hill was treated by the Senate Justice Committee, the Republican Party, the Senate, the mass media and the general public. I was equally troubled by the

silence from the African-American community.

If Clarence Thomas could actually believe he was a victim of a high tech lynching, than Anita Hill was certainly a victim of a high tech raping. Observing this form of rape created a sense of defenselessness; I felt powerless in a way that was so debilitating to me as an African-American woman. I received an extremely powerful lesson from the Hearing: when an African-American woman is hurt wounded deeply inside no one comforts her cry, she is totally alone in the world. There is no one to protect her rights, her dignity or her reputation. African-American women must fight with all their will and might to have their stories of sexual oppression heard, let alone believed. The emotional and spiritual effects resulting from this lesson seemed even more devastating than sexual harassment.

Clarence Thomas is a card carrying member of the Black Men's Club (BMC), where it is believed that African-American men do not have to justify their behaviors or attitudes towards black women. The BMC is not a formal organization; membership comes with the territory of being born an African-American male in a racist society. Thus membership cuts across class and age. It is an invidious development that grew out of the silent credo found in the African-American community, that for unity's sake we must address racism first. Sexism takes secondary importance, if any at all.

The terms demise of the Black male, the vanishing Black male, the endangered Black male all describe the precarious status of African-American men in our society today. While the desperate plight of African-American men is sadly true, some African-American men have learned to use this unfortunate state of affairs to their advantage by controlling and silencing the voices of African-American women. Some members of the BMC manipulate the harsh realities of the Black male experience and attempt to use their victimization by racism as an excuse for their dysfunctional behaviors towards Black women, especially when confronted with allegations of sexism and abuse.

Thomas figured out how to get the most leverage out of his membership in BMC. His contemptible portrayal of himself as a victim of a "high-tech lynching" was a well calculated political maneuver, one that sent the Senate Committee and the Nation - Black and White, alike - running off in an emotional rampage from images of the violent legacy of slavery and race relations in this society. White people were so busy running away from their guilt and Black people were so busy professing their anger that an African-American male was being treated in such a shameful racist manner, that Anita Hill's story about sexual harassment fell between the cracks of the combined effects of racism and sexism.

Just for the record, Black men have never been lynched in this society for sexually abusing Black women. Let's get

real! In fact, according to Estelle Freedman (1992, p.B2), a historian, "Real lynchings served to enforce a racial hierarchy precisely because the alleged victim of assault was a white woman. To the best of my knowledge, no Black man was ever lynched for assaulting a Black woman." Freedman goes on by vehemently arguing, "White men historically did not give a damn, about the honor or purity of Black women" (1992, p.B2).

For Thomas membership in the Black Men's Club had its privileges: he got away without having to disclose anything about himself relevant to Anita Hill's accusations. He didn't even bother to watch her testimony. And, he placed himself above the situation by refusing to have any aspects of his life examined. Anita Hill had none of these rights. Every nook and cranny of both her professional and personal life were open for public scrutiny. Although Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas share the same racial identity of being African-Americans, as a woman Hill had none of the privileges of membership in the BMC: African-American women have never been afforded such protection.

For Black women who also happen to be professionals, there are an abundance of myths that they must fight about their experiences. These myths are perpetuated because there are so few stories about their experiences. Black career oriented women have only fictionalized accounts of their life experiences; there are no mirror reflections that

provide authentic accounts of their lives. Here's a sample of some of the prevailing myths about professional Black women revealed during the Hearings:

Myth #1 Black women are highly sought after in the job market because they are two-fers - women and members of a minority group - companies are anxious to hire them to fulfill Affirmative Action quotas.

Reality: Research on women in the labor force reveal that White Women have been the beneficiaries of Affirmative Action programs (Almquist, 1975; Malveaux, 1985; Nkomo, 1988; Smith & Tienda, 1988). While Black woman may have access to jobs because of their dual status, this does not mean that they have equal access to opportunities for career advancement. In fact, while White women talk about the impediments of a glass ceiling, Black women face a concrete ceiling where opportunities for career advancement are drastically diminished (Ray & Davis, 1988). Many companies are still reluctant to give Black women positions with prestige and high visibility because they are not convinced these women have the skills, leadership ability and drive to perform competently in executive positions. My own and other research on African-American women managers indicate that they don't get adequate support from their managers, don't have access to information via informal networks, and have few role models they can emulate or turn to for support (Bell, 1990; Bell, Denton & Nkomo, 1992;

Greenhaus, Parasurman & Wormley, 1990; Nkomo & Cox, 1989).

Myth #2 Black women who graduate from prestigious, ivy league professional schools have greater access to employment opportunities.

Reality: A graduate degree from a high profile university certainly helps in opening doors, but by no means does it guarantee career success. There are many Black women with advanced degrees from some of the most prestigious universities in this country who have been unable to find jobs in their fields or discipline areas (Alexander, 1990; Brown & Ford, 1977, 1984; Kaufman, 1980; Leinster, 1988). For Black people in general, the formalized credentialing process alone has never been enough to ensure employment. Despite elite credentials, we still carry the stigma that somehow the degree was not legitimately earned. We must fight the stigma associated with being beneficiaries of Affirmative Action. Other factors, such as who you know or who will vouch for you, may even more critical, which brings me to myth #3.

Myth #3 Black women who have established themselves in their careers don't need to be concerned about the influence of Gatekeepers.

Reality: Much was made about Anita Hill's continual contact with Clarence Thomas even after she had made tenure and was successful in her academic life. Early on in her career, Hill needed a sponsor, a senior manager who could get Hill

in the front door of company, like the Department of Education. It seems like Thomas served as a sponsor for Hill on several occasions throughout her career. Now a sponsor is usually a senior manager within a company who advocates for a junior employee's advancement. But Thomas was also a powerful Gatekeeper for other Blacks aspiring to advance in the Republican political and professional ranks.

The notion of gatekeeper takes on a different meaning for African-American people in a racist and sexist society. Gatekeeping is a phenomenon experienced by both Black women and men. As long as there are issues around fit and comfort for Whites working with Blacks there will be a need for Gatekeepers. A Gatekeeper, in this context, is a minority person who has reached the upper ranks in their field, but who typically started his or her career as a token. The Gatekeeper has proven beyond a doubt to the powers that be, that he is trustworthy, reliable and nonthreatening especially to White men. The Black gatekeeper provides information and opinions to Whites as to whether a junior minority is a dependable person who won't cause any embarrassments or make any unnecessary waves, particularly around the issues of race and racism. He guards the entrance way to membership in exclusive, often elitist groups and he helps to determine (e.g. tenure decisions, grant contracts, fellowships, promotions), who will be let through to the next level. The Gatekeeper doesn't have to be actively

involved with the person on whom he passes judgement, in fact just the opposite may be true: the gatekeeper may only a passing knowledge about the of person.

Hill had to know that Thomas was a Gatekeeper for Blacks aspiring to advance within the conservative Republican ranks. Consequently, she could not afford to offend him, make him angry or let him know that there was the slightest bit of conflict in their relationship. She couldn't afford to make him suspicious. It might well jeopardize her career and any chance for political possibilities. Even though Hill had succeeded, Thomas was still a powerful influence working behind the scenes.

Myth #4: Successful Black women are arrogant, hard, controlling, self-centered and uppity.

Reality: Black women have been accused historically of being difficult, castrating and over-bearing (Collins,1990; Davis, 1981; Hooks 1981, 1984; King, 1988). What's left out of such accusations is any analysis on why these negative, harmful and blatantly false stereotypes of black women exist in the first place. Due to the legacy of slavery, African-American women have never had the privilege of being submissive, docile or fragile. Rarely if ever have African-American women been afforded the feminine characteristics attributed to White women.

And the conditions created by race, gender and class oppression have had powerful effects on perceptions of Black

women as well. Institutionalized racism for example, severely restricts opportunities for work among Black men. Thus, Black women often assume the role of family provider, in addition to being the family caretaker. In many instances Black women are the glue that holds the black family and community together. As young girls, we are taught to become self-reliant; they are raised with the expectation that as adults they will provide financially for themselves and their families.

Under these circumstances, Black professional women develop a positive sense of self and reveal an internal strength. They know how to speak out for themselves, and they possess an inner confidence because they know how to survive against the odds. Such qualities allow them to survive in hostile work environments, where they must contend with both racism and sexism. Black women's strength, however, is often distorted by Whites. What should be a source of empowerment is turned around to denote deviance. Thus, Black women behaviors are interpreted as being controlling, manipulative or aggressive.

The term uppity has its own historical and political significance. White men historically used the term uppity to describe Black men and women who "posed and economic or political threat to White supremacy" (Freedman, 1992). Sadly, we have appropriated the oppressive language of White men to chastise other Blacks who have dared to move beyond

the oppression that entraps us. Today the term is used by African-Americans to describe their feelings of frustration, envy or even a fear of abandonment when another black person advances beyond the norm. To be labelled as uppity means a Black person believes he or she is better than Blacks with less education, rank or status. In the worst scenario, it can also implicitly imply that the Black person is behaving like a White person by not adhering to the socially ascribed status and roles traditionally associated with African-Americans.

Because so little is known to Whites about intragroup dynamics among Blacks in the workplace, detractors of Hill could act out their envy, contempt and racial self-hatred in front of the Judiciary Committee and not be challenged on their perceptions of Hill.

I have one last thought about mythologies and Black professionals. Journalist William Safire (1991, p. A26) in his article in the New York Times entitled "Myths of the Confirmation," he actually believes that the Thomas-Hill confrontation was a, "great day for Black pride." He draws his conclusion from what seems to be a personal revelation, that the Nation had the opportunity to watch real Black professionals - not the fantasy Black characters in television sitcoms such as the Cosby's - be "articulate, sincere, and fiercely loyal" (Safire 1991, p.A26).

Well, here are a few points Mr. Safire missed. Those

well-educated Black folks were fighting on national television about pubic hair on coke cans, describing the personal peculiarities of Long Dong Silver and conjuring up images of a scorned Black woman seeking revenge, and one who also suffered from just about every psychopathic disorder known to womankind. Regardless of the status and prestige inherent among those individuals testifying, what we watched on television was the manifestation and reinforcement of the same old sexual stereotypes implicitly associated with a Black woman and man: the latter for her wantonly sexual promiscuity and the former for his animalistic sexual potency. These sexual stereotypes became even more profound, larger than life, as the Senate Committee - a group of White males - took on an air of moral correctness, arrogantly portraying themselves as far above the moral standards of everybody else so they could passed judgement on the sexual behaviors of Black people.

I am not one to believe that Black people don't possess the same struggles as Whites in maintaining moral standards. But to have the issue of sexual harassment between a Black man and woman played out on national television, with an all White male group acting as judge and jury was damaging to African-Americans, relationships among us and our already fragile community. Not to mention that this display reinforced damaging stereotypes of African-Americans among many unenlighten Whites. It smacked of racism and sexism

in the most destructive ways. As for Mr. Safire's comments, I assure him that the Thomas-Hill Hearing will not go down in Black history books with any connotation of pride but one of great sorrow and mourning. And I suspect that most Black folks would prefer to stick with the Cosby's for watching Black professionals on T.V.

Compounding the myths surrounding Black professional women are the deplorable conditions all Black women face in their communities and society in general. In contemporary society there is a growing contempt for Black women. Evidence of such contempt is shown in the high number of violent crimes committed against Black women, the disproportionate number of single Black mothers and the large number of African-American women with AIDS. In the labor force Black women are disproportionately located in the lowest paying jobs. Portrayals of Black women when we do appear in films and other media, which isn't very often show us as being over-sexualized and under-intellectualized or as hookers and domestics. And, let us not forget the vulgar depictions of Black women found in the lyrics of Rap music. Perhaps more so than any other artistic form, the Rap culture has significantly contributed to the denigration of Black womanhood. Music is a cultural artifact and it reflects the feelings, beliefs and sentiments of the people who not only make it but listen to it as well. The days when the Temptations sang, "My Girl," when young Black women were

held in some degree of reverence are all but gone (save by the music of Luther, Will Downing and Bobby Gill). Young listeners are now influenced by the likes of NWA (Niggers with an Attitude) and other rap groups whose lead rapers can't seem to say enough offensive things to Black adolescent girls. They give a profound message to young Black boys: Black women are nothing but sexual objects to be controlled and not worthy of respect or any measure of dignity.

Yet, every time an African-American woman speaks out against the unwanted sexual advances and exploitation received from Black men she is verbally attacked, discredited and disbelieved. Remember Ntozake Shange's (1975), For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enough, and Alice Walker's (1982), The Color Purple? Both were literary works by Black women that spoke to the emotional and sometimes physical abuse Black women experience in their relationships as daughters, wives, lovers, sisters with Black men. And both works received a great deal of negative criticism from the African-American community, with the angriest voices coming from Black men. What Shange and Walker courageously did was to break the code of silence. As Black women, we are born into the Order of Black Womanhood, where a code of silence is practiced when it comes to speaking out against sexism and other kinds of abuse we experience from Black men. Speaking out in this

context means specifically telling not only Blacks but Whites as well. Thus, public claims of sexual harassment by Black women where the suspect is a Black male, like the Anita Hill - Clarence Thomas confrontation, are met by ambivalence and even resentment in the Black community.

The code of silence among Black women was established during slavery and its legacy has been passed down from generation to generation. During slavery, African-American women knew they could never directly cry out about the grave sexual injustices inhumanly forced on them by the White male slave masters. Who would hear their cries for help? And, who had the power to stop White slave masters' unrelentless attacks on them? The narratives of slave women inform us that many Black women did fight back and plot against their White masters (Jacobs, 1987; McLaurin,1991). Those caught were severely punished even murdered, thereby enforcing a code of silence among the women about the sexual abuse they suffered (Freedman, 1992; Fox-Genovese, 1988; Hooks, 1981).

African-American slave women also knew speaking out about unwanted sexual advances imposed on them by Black male slaves would be in vain. Bell Hooks (1981, p. 35) cogently suggests, "the rape of black women by black male slaves is further indication that, rather than assuming the role of protector, black men imitated the white male's behavior." In the mind of the White master, such behavior displayed by male slaves towards female slaves could easily be perceived

as a breeding ritual and served only to reinforced beliefs of African-American women as wanton creatures who were sexually immoral. Because African-American women and men were chattel, property belonging to Whites, there were no laws to protect Black women from any form of violence perpetrated by White men or male slaves.

In contemporary times, the experience of racial oppression serves as a powerful bond between Black men and women. Within the African-American community there is a strong belief that our men suffer the brunt of racism, and the statistics on the status of Black men in our nation would concur. Black women understand the devastating effects of racism for Black men. Hence the code of silence among Black women is directly related to protecting, or at least not adding to, the already fragile status of African-American men. They don't want to place African-American men in any greater jeopardy by giving White men even more ammunition that can be used against them.

As young girls, Black women are socialized into the code of silence. We are taught to ignore, forgive and deny the pain inflicted on us from some Black men. We learn to be the keeper of secrets, rarely talking out in public about our feelings of pain, betrayal, abandonment and unwanted sexual advances. Breaking the silence has its consequences. Women who speak out as perceived as co-conspirators of White men. They are labelled as scorned women, evil, castrating,

women with peculiarities (the conservative term for lesbian), and other derogatory names. These women are charged by Black men and women alike, with contributing to the oppressive forces that burden Black men. Oppression in this context means race. Thus, it came to no surprise to me that the polls indicated support for Thomas among Black men and women.

All of us have colluded in the belief that by liberating Black men from racism Black women will automatically be liberated from sexism. Yet, I believe it is time we break the code of silence because as long as the struggle of African-Americans is defined solely as a struggle for Black manhood, the plight of Black women will remain invisible. The liberation of African-American women from sexism must be an explicit part of the struggle of African-Americans to free ourselves from the throws of racism or else we will never achieve full equality in our community. In 1991 Black women should not be asking, "Ain't I a woman.? Instead, the statement Black women must declare is, "We are women and we demand the dignity and respect we so rightfully deserve."

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